The Boy Who Lived

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The Boy Who Lived

by JediRobertHogan

Summary

That was Bucky's best friend collapsing to the snow, destined for a bullet in the head anyway, so what was he supposed to do?

Or,

Buck can't keep up on the forced march

Notes

A/N: I got really emotional writing this one. See my post here

See the end of the work for more notes

Fear is so much worse than cold, Bucky learned quickly.

The icy wind bit into his skin and sunk into his bones, and his whole body radiated pain with every step. They were being driven hard on this march, through several days and most of the nights, ordered to go faster and shoved when they begged for rest. The worst of it all was that they were not allowed to help each other walk. Each had to move under his own power and keep pace with the others or be shot where they fell or knelt. Passing their limp forms along the road—some that Bucky recognized after spending more than a year with them—stabbed equal waves of fear, anger, and heartsickness through his chest. He clung to his mantra to drown out the howling wind and occasional pistol shot. *One breath in, one more step, one breath out.*

The landscape around them was a pristine winter wonderland with only the road as an ugly scar, covered in a mix of filthy snow and dark frozen mud that crunched and swished with the steps of hundreds of men. Though Bucky was bundled up in his coat and hat and scarf wrapped around his face, the cold pierced his lungs and felt like it was freezing him solid from the inside. His feet were somehow numb and burning at the same time, along with clawing hunger in his stomach and a splitting headache, but all physical pains had long faded when faced with dread colder than any snowdrift, panic sharper than the stinging ice on his face, throbbing each time Gale missed a step or didn't hear Bucky speaking to him.

Bucky's attention had been glued to Gale's fevered face for days, taking note of each wince and sluggish blink. Gale had long been too thin and weak, and was fading fast. Bucky's knowledge of what would be his own fate for slowing down dogged at his ankles and kept him moving, but Buck didn't even seem to be aware of what was going on around him. His feet dragged more with each step, swaying heavily, and Bucky glanced around and moved as close as he dared, pressing his shoulder against Gale's to support some of his weight.

"Come on, Buck," he begged under his breath. "Come on. Keep walking."

Gale made a pained, breathy sound and staggered again, wavering on his feet, and a white-hot, sickening fear sunk its claws into Bucky's lungs. Gale looked up at him but only distantly, eyes glazed and uncomprehending, brow furrowed. Bucky took the chance of gripping his arm.

“Buck please, we gotta keep going.”

Gale wavered again, took another step, then his knees gave out and he sank to the ground.

“Gale!” Bucky cried. He darted forward and caught his upper body, hands burying in Gale’s thick jacket as he held him up against his legs. He couldn’t pick him up, not as emaciated as he himself was.

“Come on, get up, get up!” Bucky muttered, tugging, desperation pooling in his chest. Another prisoner came over to help, grabbing Gale’s other arm and trying to pull him up, but now he was limp as a rag doll, head rolling against Bucky’s leg, and Bucky realized with horror that Gale was unconscious. His eyes were closed, lungs rasping with each slight rise and fall, and Bucky choked back a scream.

A passing guard took one glance at Gale and pulled out his pistol. With a jerk of his head he gestured to Bucky to keep walking and Bucky swallowed down a rising bile of nausea and horror he’d never known in his twenty-eight years of life. He shook his head, kept tugging at Gale and finally ducked under his arm, fully intending to drag him, to carry him all the way if he had to. He had almost gotten Gale off the ground when a deafening click of a safety catch and cold barrel of a pistol shoved against his skull spoke without a language barrier.

Get moving or you die with him.

It was his choice, wasn’t it?

He would have to walk away, to lay the softly-breathing, helpless Gale on the snow and leave him. Leave this human being whose eyes and touch and voice had been the rock of Bucky’s life for years and Bucky would never be the same without him. The only part of Bucky that mattered would die with Gale, so in a way Bucky had known since he first laid eyes on the other boy that it wasn’t a choice at all.

Slowly, Bucky let go of Gale’s arm and let him slump back down. He took a deep breath, and with a simple certainty that rang down to his bones, began to kneel.

He lowered one knee to the dirty snow beside Gale, then the other, sitting on his heels and gathering the limp form of Gale close, tucking Gale’s face into his neck and wrapping his arms around him, cradling him into his lap. Gale stirred but didn’t wake up and Bucky shushed him gently, pressing his face into Gale’s hair.

A commotion made the cluster of prisoners stumble and Brady burst through the column, lunging at Bucky and seizing him by the coat.

“Bucky, no! Come on,” his copilot pleaded, pulling with all his might, but Bucky tightened every muscle and curled more around Gale.

“Go Brady,” he snapped, “That’s an order.” Brady’s dirty, terrified face stabbed him in the chest but he grit his teeth and turned away. Brady continued to beg and tug desperately until a guard struck him hard in the chest with a rifle butt, enough to knock him loose and immediately be grabbed by a stricken-looking Crank and Alex. They dragged Brady away kicking and struggling, and Bucky tried to block out his pleading. At least DeMarco was farther up and hadn’t seen what was happening, what was about to happen. Two more shots would mean nothing to him, though he was bound to recognize Brady’s cries soon.

A couple more guards had congregated and Bucky vaguely understood the order to wait until the column of prisoners had passed or it could start a riot. These were their leaders after all, the heart and the soul of so many men. The pistol on Bucky’s head left as the guard ordered another one to do the job and the rest to follow him. Somewhere along the line another shot rang out, the rapid end of another worn out soul who couldn't take another step, put down like a dog, and Bucky clenched his jaw.

He was afraid, he couldn't lie to himself, watching the prisoners' legs shuffle past the tall black boots of the guard just in front of him. He didn’t want to die, but he found that now he knew it was happening, now that every breath felt like a year—a new birth, a cold lifetime in his lungs—every second he held Gale was precious enough to make the life he had lived worthwhile.

The line of prisoner feet started to thin. Gale was warm and comforting in his arms and Bucky thought suddenly of the stories he heard in school about Pompeii, of skeletons found buried centuries later with their arms wrapped around one another, with only one thought in the face of imminent, inescapable death. He didn’t expect it to be this peaceful, the acceptance of it. To be granted the hardly-dared dream of spending the rest of his life with Gale and breathing their last together. Bucky ducked his head and pressed his mouth to the neck of Gale’s thick jacket, looking over his shoulder at the wide field. He began to rock Gale slightly, not caring how it looked to their executioner.

The sun sparkled on the snow. On a bare bush at the far edge of the road a sparrow landed, then took flight as if it were taking their own lives away on its thin wings, and Bucky's limbs began to tremble.

"I love you," he whispered thickly into Gale's ear, the only words that ever mattered. "I love you, I loved you." He kissed Gale's cold cheek, hoping he couldn't hear, wouldn't wake up and realize what was happening, so he could go to sleep peacefully in Bucky's arms. Gale's steady breathing grounded him, echoing louder than the sound of the guard reloading his pistol.

The boots shifted, and Bucky buried his fingers tighter into Gale's coat.

The blow of the pistol butt against the side of his head took him by surprise. He was still reeling when the guard's boot cracked into his side, driving the breath from his lungs, and he doubled over. The next kick struck Gale in the back and Bucky shrank away, looking up for the first time at the guard's face to only get a glimpse before another blow to his cheek drove him away.

"Careful, they're watching."

The guard spoke clean English, but with a heavy accent, and confusion blurred Bucky's mind before another kick landed, the metal cleats on the boot cutting into Bucky's forearm.

"Listen carefully," the guard said lowly. "When I shoot, fall down with him. Don't move till the column is gone."

Another kick swung out, but instead of hitting Bucky the boot stuck the ground beside his shoulder, out of sight of the now more-distant marchers and spraying Bucky with snow.

"A Wehrmacht convoy is coming down the road in a few minutes. They will put you in a truck and take you to another camp," he continued, and Bucky struggled to wrap his head around what was happening.

"They won't help us," he rasped, and the guard fake kicked again.

"The army are notorious rivals of the SS. They will help you out of spite if nothing else."

Without another word he took aim and pulled the trigger. The bullet whizzed by Bucky's head so close could feel the air move and he did

what he hoped was a convincing jerk and collapse, bringing Gale down with him like a ragdoll. Another shot lodged a bullet in the frozen mud beside Gale's head, and immediately the guard departed, leaving only the crunch of retreating footsteps and Brady's distant screams.

Bucky squeezed his eyes shut and forced his muscles limp, holding his breath until his lungs were empty and limbs so frozen he couldn't feel if he even had a body, only a sickening ghost made of horror and dread. Maybe he actually was dead, or the guard would come back, or someone else would see them.

He lay there for an eternity with lungs burning and spots dancing behind his eyelids, every fiber of his being screaming that a single thought or breath or sign of life would sentence them.

Finally, toeing the edge from passing out from lack of air, he forced his eyes open, picking up his head just enough to look down the road. It was empty, nothing but the swath of mud splitting the open field of unmarked snow as far as the eye could see and Bucky let his head fall back down with a gasp that tore his chest open, flooding his lungs and making him dizzy. He sucked in another breath, then another, his sluggish brain hesitant to grasp he was alive, still, for another few moments at least.

Bucky rolled over onto his stomach, pulling himself to Gale and collapsing on his chest. He buried his face in the damp sweater, gripping and pulling toward himself and sobbing like a child. The thick layers muffled his gasps and half-screaming cries as he grasped pitifully at anything that could save him, consumed with nothing but child-like, abandoned fear.

Bucky cries himself awake in his own bed. The first sensation he becomes conscious of is Gale's warm hand smoothing over his back, followed by the soft sheets on his skin and the sight of the curtains fluttering around the open window. He sits up, pulling his knees to his chin and wrapping his arms around them, clasping a hand over the scar that runs down the back of his wrist and forearm. It's already dawn, and through the wide window the jutting Wyoming mountains and plains make a picture so beautiful it's breathtaking, but now just

puts the air back in Bucky's lungs instead of snatching it away. This is home. It's beautiful and peaceful and still marred with their own memories that don't quite die.

Gale sits up, still half asleep, draping himself over Bucky's back and sliding his arms around him. They don't speak. Gale knows what Bucky dreams of, and has not yet come to terms with the guilt he feels at not being able to remember that day. He gently dislodges Bucky's arm and kisses the scar, then kisses Bucky's damp cheeks.

There are letters on the end table from the other guys. They're coming for a visit again soon, some with their families, and it will be nice to have more life around. There's more than enough room on the ranch. Bucky's ribs throb in anticipation of Brady's crushing hug, the kind he's been giving out since they first reunited, and the thought brings a ghost of a smile to his face.

Gale presses his lips to Bucky's bare shoulder. The warmth thaws a tiny drop more of the ice still clinging to the cavities of Bucky's chest since that winter, and slowly he lets himself breathe, and fall.

End Notes

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